

Life in the Fast Lane

The new Republican appetite for bigger government continues, with House Transportation Chairman Don Young still determined to push through a higher gasoline tax to pay for more highways. The one thing with a hope of stopping him is a brewing backbench Congressional revolt to offer a free-market solution to traffic congestion.

*A revolt to block
a higher gasoline tax.*

Mr. Young, an Alaskan, might as well be a pork-barrel Democrat from Mississippi. He's proposing a \$375 billion highway bill that is 60% richer than the last highway bill that was itself a record. To pay for it, Mr. Young wants to raise the federal gas tax by a nickel a gallon, to 23 cents, and then index it to inflation (meaning an annual stealth tax hike in perpetuity). Some of us can remember when *opposition* to tax-rate indexing was a GOP cause, but that was when Republicans were in the minority and had to stand for something.

Congestion and old roads are problems, and drivers waste some 3.6 billion hours and 5.7 billion gallons of fuel in delays and traffic jams. But the answer isn't to pile a further burden onto all drivers and the economy by raising the gas tax.

A better idea comes from Mark Kennedy, a backbench Republican from Minnesota who seems to have missed the tax-increase memo. His Freeing Alternatives for Speedy Transportation Act, or FAST, would repeal the 1958 prohibition on interstate highway tolls. (The few that exist were grandfathered at the time.) With the ban removed, a state (or private entity) would be able to collect a driving fee in order to finance interstate expansion

and additional highway lanes.

FAST has several virtues that avoid the worst flaws of existing toll roads. First, the fees would have to be collected electronically, reducing those toll-booth traffic jams and the need to hunt for quarters in your car. Better yet, states would be

able to impose a toll only on new priority lanes, and only for as long as it takes to finance those new lanes in the corridor; government couldn't turn the tolls into permanent money-raisers for any spending purpose.

Most important, FAST would return control over highway projects to local officials, who are better placed than Washington to know which roads need upgrading. With the money going to the right places (rather than pet projects), traffic flow will improve. Under Mr. Young's system, the feds are the lords of the highway, dispensing cash to the politically best connected, who aren't always the most in need.

This idea will not be popular with environmentalists who hate new roads on principle, or with liberals who think special, fast, toll lanes will favor "rich" drivers. But a universal gas tax hits the poor harder than it does the rich. Like the many private toll roads that now exist, these fast-lane tolls would only hit drivers who voluntarily choose to use them.

Mr. Young meets today with the House leadership to make another pitch for his higher, inflation-indexed gas tax. We hear he isn't opposed to FAST on principle but fears it'll scuttle his tax plans. We hope so, and we hope more Republicans rediscover their free-market principles and join Mr. Kennedy's street-smart revolt.